

CHAPTER XXV: U.S. MARINE (PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE) HOSPITAL

By 1850 San Francisco had become a busy port as ships from around the world arrived to discharge their gold-crazed passengers and, often as not, their crews. To attend to the needs of sick and disabled seamen who had been cast ashore and who crowded the waterfront, the California legislature passed a joint resolution asking the federal government to establish a marine hospital at San Francisco. The United States had established the Marine Hospital Service under the Treasury Department in 1798 for the world's seamen in the merchant marine, free of charge, ashore in American ports and in need of hospitalization. At that time seamen were plagued with cholera, yellow fever, and generally unsanitary living conditions. Reacting to California's request, the U.S. Congress passed an act on September 30, 1850, appropriating \$50,000 for such a hospital.¹

In November 1851 Charles Homer entered into a contract with the federal government to construct the hospital. Because of difficulties in acquiring a suitable site, work on the building did not get underway until December 1852. Meanwhile, William L. Hodge, the Acting Secretary of the Treasury, asked the Congress for an additional appropriation of \$130,000 for San Francisco. Located at Harrison and Spear streets on Rincon Point the hospital finally reached completion in December 1853, thus making it one of the oldest hospitals in the city.²

An earthquake that struck San Francisco in 1868 damaged the marine hospital to the extent that it was abandoned. The Treasury Department arranged for the seamen to be cared for by contract at St. Mary's College, a brick three-story building. In fiscal year 1871, St. Mary's treated 1,017 seamen at a cost to the government of \$54,421, and the next year, 962 seamen costing \$30,070. The supervising surgeon of the Hospital Service wrote that the college building, located in a "bleak and windy valley," was not suited as a hospital. He recommended that a proper hospital be built on Angel Island, which was already federal

1. *The Army at the Golden Gate*, p. 76; U.S. Congress, House, Miscellaneous Document 53 (31-1), Serial 582; House, Executive Document 133 (32-1), Serial 649. A few months later the federal government authorized a marine hospital near the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon Territory. U.S. Congress, Senate, Miscellaneous Document 30 (31-2), Serial 592. In 1895 a marine hospital was established at Post Townsend at the entrance to Puget Sound in Washington State.

2. Lotchin, *San Francisco*, p. 185; B.E. Lloyd, *Lights and Shades in San Francisco* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft, 1876), pp. 431-432; U.S. Congress, House, Executive Document 54 (33-1), Serial 721, and Executive Document 133 (32-1), Serial 649.

property.

When the Army's board of engineers for fortifications reported that the Angel Island site was needed by the Army for the coastal defenses of San Francisco Bay, the Secretary of the Treasury then asked for a tract near the Presidio's Mountain Lake for hospital purposes. Following an internal debate the Army agreed providing that Mountain Lake, Lobos Creek, and the local roads be reserved to the Presidio and that the Army retained the right to destroy the hospital buildings in case of war. The agreement was signed on January 28, 1874.³

Completed in 1875 the marine hospital stood on "Western Terrace" overlooking Mountain Lake. Three wood frame ward buildings radiated from a central drive and smaller support buildings and living quarters stood on either side of the wards. Only a boiler house was constructed with concrete walls. The cost of construction amounted to \$59,000. The hospital reservation contained eighty-five acres and it surrounded the lake on the east, west, and north. The hospital set aside eight and a half acres for a vegetable garden in order to provide fresh produce for patients and staff. By 1892, however, the garden had grown to forty acres and the Presidio's Colonel Graham became alarmed. He wrote to the hospital surgeon pointing out that the garden bordered on Mountain Lake and that the hospital placed large amounts of manure on it, the natural drainage being toward the lake. He reminded the hospital that the military posts were dependent on good water from Mountain Lake and Lobos Creek, that the War Department had reserved both, and that it was essential for the Army to control them effectively. He concluded by saying "the Military authorities" desired that cultivation of the gardens be discontinued as soon as possible.⁴

Since its inception the Marine Hospital Service had accepted the merchant seamen of all nations. In 1894 it extended hospital benefits to the keepers and crews of life saving stations, including the U.S. Life Saving Station in the lower Presidio. In 1902 the Treasury's U.S. Marine Hospital Service was renamed the Public Health and Marine-Hospital Service but at San Francisco the term Marine Hospital remained

3. J.M. Woodworth, November 1, 1872, in U.S. Congress, Senate, Executive Document 13 (42d-3), Serial 1545; Chief of Engineers, January 6, 1874, to Secretary of War, PSF, Bulky File, RG 77, NA; U.S. Army, *Outline Description of Military Posts, 1904*, p. 378; *Alta California*, February 21, 1874.

4. NPS, National Register Forms, PSF, p. 7-42; "Draft, Cultural Resources Inventory Update," 1988, Master Plans, PSF; Graham, August 12, 1892, to U.S. Marine Hospital, PSF, Letters Sent, RG 393, NA.

in common use for years to come.⁵

When Maj. William Harts prepared his 1907 report on the expansion of the Presidio he noted that in the past there had been much friction between the hospital and the Presidio. He concluded that the Marine Hospital should move, perhaps to Angel Island (again) where the U.S. Marine Hospital Service had established a quarantine station in 1891. The Presidio's commander in 1909, Col. John A. Lundeen, raised the issue of the marine hospital's cemetery that lay a short distance north of the buildings. Like the garden drainage problem of the 1890s, Lundeen considered the cemetery a menace to the quality of Mountain Lake water. It appeared, however, that no action was taken to modify the situation. The marine hospital's chief surgeon had his own complaint. The Army's Quartermaster Department had teams hauling heavy loads through the hospital reserve that were permanently damaging the roadway.⁶

Also in 1909 the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce requested Congress to replace the marine hospital with a new facility costing \$500,000 at the Presidio of San Francisco. An alarmed War Department quickly informed Congress that the Presidio's garrison was about to be increased and recommended that the marine hospital be moved to Benecia Barracks, that post no longer being suited to the Army's activities. A stalemate of sorts resulted; a new hospital was not built nor did the old one move.⁷

In 1918 the Public Health Service undertook to increase the facilities at the marine hospital, which it described as consisting of three ward buildings, a kitchen and two mess halls, officers' quarters, attendants' quarters, and outbuildings. The work involved remodeling buildings, improving the mechanical equipment such as the refrigeration plant, telephone, and bedside call systems. Cost of the work amounted to \$240,000, with another \$10,000 going for furniture and equipment.⁸

While no structures remain from the 1875 marine hospital, four buildings erected between 1915 and 1920

5. U.S. Congress, House, Report 351 (53-2), Serial 3269. In 1912 the agency became the Public Health Service.

6. Harts, *Report*, p. 86; J.A. Lundeen, November 5, 1909, to Department of California, and Surgeon in Command, October 2, 1909, PSF, Bulky File, RG 393, NA.

7. R.S. Oliver, March 30, 1909, to J.R. Knowland, Register of Letters Received, PSF, RG 393, NA; U.S. Congress, House, Document 1323 (61-3), Serial 5951, p. 196.

8. U.S. Congress, House, Document 815 (65-2), Serial 7447.

have survived: two buildings that served as quarters and garages for senior attendants, 1806 and 1807, and two officers' quarters, 1809 and 1810.

Both buildings 1806 and 1807 were constructed circa 1920. Building 1806 had two stories, the ground level serving as vehicle garages and the second floor individual quarters. Building 1807 was similarly arranged except that it had three floors, the upper two serving as apartments.

Officer's quarters 1810, built in 1915, was the oldest surviving building in the hospital complex in 1994. The two-story, wood frame, stucco-covered residence faced north away from Mountain Lake, in contrast to the other officers' quarters that looked upon the lake. That view was interrupted with the construction of Park-Presidio Boulevard in the 1930s. Officer's quarters 1809 was built in 1920. It had two stories and was the most northerly residence on officers' row.⁹

In 1927 the hospital's reservation was reduced greatly to thirty-five acres, which were transferred to the Treasury Department but with a clause that called for the title to revert to the War Department whenever the tract ceased to be used for marine hospital uses.¹⁰

In 1932 the old wooden hospital buildings, almost sixty years old, overcrowded, and potential fire hazards, were demolished and a new, reinforced concrete, six-story hospital building, 1801, was constructed on a terrace overlooking the city. It had a rectangular front block and three large rear wings. The outer wings also had six stories and the much longer middle wing had three stories. Red tile covered the roof while the walls were clad in buff-colored brick. This building was the largest structure on the military reservation. In 1952 two seven-story wings with a one-story connector were added to the front of the building, thus partially obstructing the original front facade.¹¹

A number of other buildings, all built in 1932, comprised the new hospital complex:

9. NPS, *Presidio National Register Forms*, pp. 7-52 and 7-152-153. The original portion of the engineering-maintenance shop, 1802, may also be an early structure, probably being built in 1928. *Ibid.*, p. 7-193.

10. U.S. Army, Sacramento Division Engineer, "Cultural Resources Inventory Update," p. 98.

11. NPS, *Presidio National Register Forms*, p. 7-154; U.S. Division Engineer, "Cultural Resources," p. 98.

Recreation center, 1805. One and a half story. Wood frame. Walls buff-colored brick veneer. Roof, red tile. Colonial Revival architecture.

Nurses' quarters, 1808. Three stories. A wooden lantern having a copper roof stood on the roof of the building disguising a central air vent. Buff-colored brick walls. Colonial Revival.

Officer's quarters, 1811. Two stories. Stucco-clad walls on a wood frame.

Four duplex officers' quarters, 1812-1815. Each two stories with a one-story front porch. Stucco-clad walls on a wood frame.

Laboratories, 1818 and 1819. Small one-story buildings with flat roofs. Buff-colored brick walls.

Meter house, 1828. Small, block-like, and windowless. Stucco-clad walls.¹²

The Works Progress Administration graded and constructed double tennis courts north of the main hospital building and planted shrubbery around the courts in the 1930s. Several other structures were added to the complex in succeeding years such as the flagstaff, 1800, erected in 1952, a recreation bunker, 1803, in the 1950s; and an emergency helipad, 1831, in the 1960s.

On July 1, 1939, all marine hospitals were placed under the jurisdiction of the Federal Security Agency, headed by the Surgeon General of the United States. The marine hospital now treated merchant seamen, the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Geodetic Survey, victims of Hansen's disease, and Native Americans.¹³

In 1963 the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), the successor to the Federal Security Agency, asked the Army to transfer 1.99 acres from the Presidio to the hospital. The Army donated this land in 1964 and it served as a buffer between the hospital's Plague Investigation Laboratory (buildings

12. NPS, *Presidio National Register Forms*, pp. 7-59, 7-154-158.

13. Mooser, *Report on Progress*, item 2171, p. 83; U.S. Division Engineer, "Cultural Resources," p. 98.

1818 and 1819) and Presidio buildings.¹⁴

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare proposed to reduce the activities of the Public Health Service in 1970 and it set the date of July 1973 for closing the San Francisco hospital. Although the hospital had a declining occupancy, in 1970 it had an average monthly inpatient load of 425 and the annual outpatient visits totaled 122,700. The hospital employed nearly 1,000 people of whom 100 were physicians. If the facility continued to operate, \$13 million would be required to bring it up to code. Upon learning of the closure the AFL-CIO Seafarer's International Union protested vigorously and the hospital remained open for the time being.¹⁵

In 1974 the Army learned that HEW planned to make excess 7.5 acres of the hospital's land. Reacting quickly, the Presidio informed higher headquarters that the land was part of the "Green Belt" open space and buffer zone within the reservation. Traditionally it had always been an integral part of the Presidio and it was part of the land that the Presidio and the City and County of San Francisco had agreed would not be developed. The storm blew over; the land remained green.¹⁶

But time ran out for the hospital. In 1981 the federal government announced its closure. Congressman Philip Burton immediately protested. The *San Francisco Examiner* published an article, "Burton's fight Reagan on hospital" in April pointing out that the majority of patients were still seamen. Others included the U.S. Coast Guard, National Oceanic Atmosphere Administration, some Department of Defense members and retirees, Native Americans, Indo-China refugees, and some 400 lepers from the western states and Hawaii. The hospital maintained 242 beds, down from 300. But the federal government's Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 terminated medical benefits for merchant seamen and called for the closure of all Public Health Service hospitals and clinics. The hospital closed its doors on November 1, 1981, and on the 13th the Treasury Department transferred the hospital's thirty-five acres and the facilities to the Department of the Army. Three years later it also gave back the 1.99 acres thus allowing the Army to construct a short road joining the Presidio's road network with the hospital's.¹⁷

14. U.S. Division Engineer, "Cultural Resources," p. 98.

15. *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 17, 1970.

16. CO, PSF, October 4, 1974, to CO, U.S. Army Forces Command, Fort McPherson, Georgia.

17. *San Francisco Examiner*, April 27, 1981; Secretary of the Treasury R.S.

Congress directed the Department of the Army to offer a ten-year lease of the hospital to the City and County of San Francisco for the treatment of AIDS patients; but the city did not implement this provision. Meanwhile, the Army contemplated what uses it might make of the complex. The Presidio said it could use the twelve units of the officers' quarters and suggested that the Sixth U.S. Army might be interested in establishing its headquarters in the main hospital building. The commander of Letterman Army Medical Center wanted to retain the hospital for storing its War Reserve stock then at Fort Baker. Also, the 6253d U.S. Army Hospital (Reserve) could relocate there from Hamilton Air Force Base.

In the end the Defense Language Institute made use of some of the structures while its facilities at the Presidio of Monterey were being modernized. Both Letterman and the Presidio's Directorate of Engineering and Housing stored mobilization stocks at the hospital. A Chinese-American International School subsequently occupied part of a wing.¹⁸

The marine hospital had since the 1870s maintained a cemetery north of the hospital complex. While no interments had been made in recent years, the cemetery reportedly held the remains of from 200 to 500 merchant seamen. Partially covered by a paved parking area and the tennis courts, the cemetery was cleared of grave markers and remains. In recent times, however, a landfill in the area disclosed the partial skeletal remains of two individuals.¹⁹

In 1972 Congress established Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the Bay Area. While the law included the Presidio of San Francisco within the boundaries and stated that the reservation was to be transferred to the national recreation area when the Army determined it to be excess to its needs, the marine hospital complex was not included within the designated boundary. In 1989, as a result of the Base Realignment and Closure Act, the Army announced that the post would be closed and began plans to vacate. It maintained, however, that under the Act the hospital complex was excluded from the
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Schweiker, November 13, 1981, to Secretary of the Army J.O. Marsh. The road and its extension were named Battery Caulfield Road after the nearby Nike missile battery of that name.

18. F.W. Hall, November 13, 1981, to U.S. Army Forces Command; U.S. Division Engineer, "Cultural Resources," p. 98.

19. U.S. Army, *Final Environmental Impact Statement*, item 5-9. Subsequent archeological testing confirmed the existence of intact graves below the landfill and parking lot.

Presidio reservation and the Army was free to sell the property to help defray the expenses of moving. The National Park Service believed the hospital to be an important part of the national recreation area and conceived of it becoming a residential education and conference center.²⁰

For more than one hundred years the U.S. Marine Hospital at the Presidio of San Francisco tended to the needs of merchant seamen, free of charge, from all corners of the world. In addition, refugees from Vietnam, Native Americans, members of the U.S. Coast Guard and other federal agencies, leprosy victims from Hawaii, and others also found succor there. The hospital established the Plague Investigation Laboratory to study such terrors as leprosy and plague diseases. It began on this site in a small complex of wood frame buildings. When it ceased operations it closed the doors to the largest building on the Presidio reservation. It had a significant if little-known history.

20. NPS, *Creating a Park*, pp. 2 and 80.